

Charles Barber

August 9, 1996

RG-50.106*0024

Abstract

Charles Barber was born in 1932 in Budapest, Hungary. He experienced some anti-Semitism as a child and, on a recent visit, noted that it still exists there. He recalls hearing the German bombs drop near his home and saw the devastation they left. His father was forced into a labor camp where he died. His mother spent time in a Hungarian labor camp and later was taken away and never heard from again. Sometimes his aunt and uncle cared for him and other times, he was left with a former housekeeper, a relative, an orphanage and the Red Cross. For a period, he stayed at the Wallenberg house but had little to eat. After the war, he completed three years of law school and left Hungary in 1956 when the revolution started and felt it was not safe as he was Jewish. He escaped to a Red Cross camp in Austria and with his uncle's help, immigrated to the US where he studied accounting and worked in the same organization for 30 years. Seven years ago he married and since then visited their familiar places in Europe.

Summary

00:00 **Side A** Charles Barber was born in 1932 in Budapest, Hungary. His family lived in back of their liquor store which they sold when he was five. They moved to a building which was originally owned by his grandparents who left one-third to him and two-thirds to their sons. A noted remembrance was when just before entering grade school, a friend in the building warned him that a classmate will not speak to him because his father is an Army officer and does not talk to Jews. Charles was surprised to learn that it is wrong to be a Jew in Hungary. The friend proved to be correct as the classmate never spoke to him. He had no further troubles until he started attending religious classes in his public school when the non-Jews told him that he killed Christ. The students attended religious classes of their own denomination.

05:00 War broke out in 1939 with the first bomb dropped several blocks away from his home. People said that the Germans were bombing to influence Hungary to go to war with Yugoslavia. He was seven or eight when his father was called to labor duty as were other civilians. His mother earned a living by working as a seamstress at home. His father wore a yellow armband to indicate he was in a Jewish labor camp. His father's younger brother converted to Catholic or Lutheran to make life easy and he volunteered for labor camp duty and wore a white armband. Hungarian and German troops marched into Russia. His father was sent with them and about two months later, when Charles was about 10 or 11, his father died. Before that, his father came home for a few days and once was sick and came for a few months. In 1943, his mother received a telegram from

the Gestapo that in 24 or 48 hours she must report to headquarters at the Hotel Majestic. She was not given a reason for this but thought a neighbor might have turned her in for listening to the BBC.

- 10:00 His mother had two sisters in Hungary, one married a gentile and became gentile. After his mother left for the hotel, his gentile uncle took him to his former housekeeper (and probably gave her money for his care). Charles was an only child. Several months later when Jews had to wear the Jewish star and there were Jewish stars on buildings, the uncle took him to a Jewish relative. Before he left, a friend asked for his card collection as he would no longer need it but he did not respond. After his stay at the relative for a few weeks, his mother went to a Hungarian camp, "Kisentanča" (?), probably a camp for political or criminal prisoners. After eight months, she was let out and went to live with him and the relative. He remembers the day the Hungarian leader made a speech that Hungary lost the war for Germany which made them happy as they thought they would now survive.
- 15:00 By evening, a Hungarian Nazi took over the government and several days later his mother said that they would move to another house with a yellow star near her two sisters. He felt bad when he asked his mother for food and she did not answer as she had none. One morning at 4 AM Nazis with armbands came to the building and rang the same gong as in air raids and ordered all Jews to the courtyard. They stood on one line which was divided into two lines. Just before he got separated from his mother, she gave him her money and did not look at him. They took his mother and her sister away. Two days later, the Christian uncle took him by streetcar to priests who would not accept him. The next day, the uncle took him to a building at the main thoroughfare, the Ring, and left him at a building with a Swedish flag. He was 12 (November 1944) when he was alone for two or three days. One night a Christian family fed him.
- 20:00 In the evening he could hear the Russian artillery nearby. Later he learned that his building had connections to Raoul Wallenberg and that the guard with a Nazi armband was Jewish. When the Russians arrived, Charles came out of the building as he was weak. He was in the Swedish building from November to January with children and a man who might have been a Rabbi as he tried to teach Judaism and the Hebrew alphabet to the children. They each got a slice of bread daily and sometimes beans. He was starved by the time the Russians arrived. One day he sneaked out of the building and saw that on the wall it said, "Jews found outside the ghetto will be killed on the spot." There were Christians living nearby but he did not go to them as he would be a danger to them. He found a jar of marmalade and another child his age (about 11 or 12) asked him if he was a Jew and why he was on the street. He thought the child might have thought him a Jew because of his nose and they were trained to look for the Jewish nose.

- 25:00 There were few people on the street as Russian mortars were going down the street. He saw bombed out buildings and dead people. He was friendly to two or three boys in the Swedish house but does not recall their names. They talked about their parents, family, and food. For years after the war, he drooled when he saw people eating. He returned to his gentile aunt who was not too good to him. All the buildings were connected through the basements. One day he was in the basement and a group of Nazi soldiers came through and one gave them candy though they were Jewish.
- 30:00 **Side B** He loved the first wave of Russian troops who were Asian rather than European. Though they stole and raped, there was no discrimination, the same to all. When the second wave of Russians came, the European Russians, he went to his aunt. Three Russians came to the apartment, one was Jewish and the others Christian. The aunt spoke Yiddish to the Jew and he said, "I don't care what happens, I won't stop until I get to Berlin." They set up anti-aircraft batteries on each corner in defense of the German bombing. After the war, the aunt placed him with the Red Cross for three months and then he was sent back and the aunt sent him to an orphanage run by Zionists in Zagreb (?). There his mother had cousins and he found them upon their return from Thereisenstadt. He was removed from the orphanage in a month and in 1 and ½ years finished high school and returned to Budapest. He worked in a factory and they sent him to law school until the Revolution in 1956. Everyone had guns and an older man entered and said, "boys, you need pointers on what to do, the Jews brought the Communists." He felt like shooting the man but decided to leave and go to the US.
- 35:00 He left in his 3rd year of law school and never finished. He took the train and got off close to the Austrian border and walked across into Austria. His uncle had completed medical school in Austria but could not practice there so went to the US in 1938. Charles stayed in a Red Cross camp for fleeing Hungarians where they permitted him to telegram his uncle. The uncle responded that he should come and the US did not charge him anything for the trip as they took in 20,000 Hungarians. They were settled in Camp Kilmar (?) and he studied accounting. He could not obtain credit for his law school education based on the Napoleonic code since the US uses British common law. He worked during the day at ABC Trans-National Transports and studied accounting at night at the Queensboro Community College and later at Barnard Baruch. He continued working at the same corporation for 30 years.
- 40:00 He first got married seven years ago. He feels that he has never recovered from his wartime experiences. He awakens at night with nightmares. He feels that he functions about 70 to 80% but it was sufficient to succeed in his profession. He met his wife through an elderly lady who he drove to radiation treatment. His first date with his wife was to the races where they learned they had similar interests and background. She came from Vienna and experiences the German Anschluss when she and her parents escaped to Yugoslavia. Charles came from a non-religious family though his father's family kept

kosher. He studied religion in school and remembered lighting Friday night candles and, as a child, praying nightly. At the time that his Bar Mitzvah should have taken place, he was herding pigs while residing in a Red Cross camp.

- 45:00 Charles' aunt had no interest in Bar Mitzvah. He felt warmer towards the husband but the wife ruled the family. There seemed to be sibling rivalry between his mother and his aunt. He felt that it was a good thing that the mother was with the younger sister but he never found out exactly what happened to them. Someone came to his aunt's apartment and said he saw his father died in Northwest Hungary and brought a photo showing it. The aunt said they could go to the Jewish cemetery as remains of those who died in the camp were brought back and placed in a memorial. They went and saw his father's name written on the memorial. Someone claimed they saw his mother and her sister the day before Bergen Belsen was liberated but they never came home (many died after liberation). He and his wife took one trip to Europe. First they went to Vienna to see his wife's old building where she lived and then to Budapest to see the building that he owned one-third but it was taken from him.
- 50:00 He went to see his first cousin, the Christian aunt's daughter, but she acted like she did not know him although they had lived together. Charles thought her attitude was due to the fact she thought they would get rich from his living in the US but did not. She merely admitted that she had met him and Charles responded, "G-d bless." He then showed the Swedish safe house to his wife and various places where he lived in Budapest including the new owner of a store. Charles said the former owner, a Nazi, was not nice and kept a picture of Rommel on the wall until he lost. He suspected the former owner had caused his mother's arrest. He was unable to find his friend from law school. Then they spent a week at Lake Balatin (?) and returned their rental car to Munich where they had begun their journey.
- 55:00 They brought a camera to the place where his mother was taken from and someone said that it was not a tourist site but it was meaningful to him so he took a photo. They went to a café where he remembered they had wonderful cake and it was still there so they partook. He is glad he took the trip but does not plan to go again. There is still a lot of anti-Semitism in Budapest. He thinks that his cousin did not want to associate with him as she did not want her husband to know that she is half-Jewish. Their name sounds aristocratic and he might divorce her if he knew the truth about his wife. He took a taxi to the cemetery where his grandparents were buried and the driver gave him a funny look so he thought he might be anti-Semitic. He still blushes if someone asks if he is Jewish as they might think he is a criminal. It has taken him a long time to look someone in the eye and admit that he is Jewish. He has never been to Israel and would like to go. He will try to convince his wife to go though she is afraid of violence there. He is not afraid of anything as he could have been killed by the bombing or by the Nazis.

60:00 While in Hungary, he was aware of what went on in Israel and was praying for them. The Budapest newspapers were sympathetic at first but later became anti-Zionist.

File 2 of 2

Abstract

In this part, Charles tells of his Budapest experiences when the city turned Communist in '56 and he felt that he must leave. He shows photos of his mother, father, his wedding, his two aunts, his cousin and two uncles. He has a letter from his mother written on toilet paper from the Hungarian camp where she was interned.

Summary

00:00 **Side A** Although they saved his life, Charles felt the Communists were cruel and not logical. In the 50s, he was afraid to go to his building which he owned one-third as they would call him "Capitalist." For the same reason he lied about his father's occupation and did not reveal that he owned a liquor store. He only stated what was required because he desired to go to law school. Nevertheless, he left his education in '56 and left Hungary but he cannot forget his experiences though now he leads a normal life. Charles showed a photo of his father and also has one of his mother. She was interned in a Hungarian labor camp and succeeded in sending a letter to her sister written on toilet paper. (Charles shows his wedding picture and the letter to the interviewer.) The letter was sent from Camp "Kichtancha"(?) telling her sister to take care of him. Charles can still comprehend the Hungarian. The letter thanks the sister for a package and says she feel lonely without her son as she is the one to give him strength to survive.

05:00 The mother begs the sister to care for him and pray for the other sister interned with her. Charles explains that the two sisters died together. He does not know what to do with the letter as he is old. Charles shows the interviewer pictures of the aunt who was killed and the Christian aunt and her daughter (who did not recognize him). Then he shows a photo of his father with the youngest brother (the first casualty) and the other brother who came to the US (and died about ten years ago). Charles ends with a thought that in 50 years they may realize that it was bad.